

Petersburg Gas Light Company
Gas Holder
Bank St. at Madison St.
City of Petersburg
Virginia

HAER No. VA-14

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VA,
27-PET,
33A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

Petersburg Gas Light Company Gasholder

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Location:	200 feet south of Bank Street and 200 feet east of Madison Street in Petersburg, Virginia. UTM: 18.287340.4123030 Quad: Petersburg
Date of Construction:	1876
Present Owner:	Commonwealth Gas Distribution Corporation
Present Use:	Preserved <u>in situ</u> as historic artifact
Significance:	A rare survivor of a once popular means of storing gas. The Petersburg Gasholder is distinguished by its cast iron frame which incorporates many Tuscan order columns.
Historian:	Donald C. Jackson

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In 1976, the Petersburg Gasholder remained a rare survivor of a once common industrial structure. At one time scheduled to be completely demolished, according to Carl A. Miller, Vice President and Treasurer of Commonwealth Gas Distribution Corporation, the gasholder has been partially preserved and there are plans for it to be presented as an exhibit accessible to the public. Though the cylindrical holding tank has been removed since photographed by Jack Boucher, the skeletal structure designed to guide and support the tank is still extant.

According to researchers in the Petersburg Public Library, the gas holder was built by Tanner and Company of Richmond in 1876. Various newspaper accounts estimated the cost to be between \$1,000 and \$4,000. Richard J. Pollak, author of Nineteenth-Century Engineering, Industry, Transportation, and Technology, a booklet which refers to the Petersburg Gasholder, states that the structure was altered in 1911.

A gasholder of this type worked on the principle that as additional gas was stored in the holder, the cylindrical holding tank would rise to provide additional space. Originally, the Petersburg gasholder was a double-lift holder, meaning that there were two cylindrical structures which telescoped into one another and together formed the entire gas holding tank. In 1911, the double-lift structure was replaced by a single cylindrical tank.

The remaining skeletal structure is 60 feet in diameter and 42 feet high. The cast iron columns and beams are built on brick foundations. There are six sets of double Tuscan order columns which are equally spaced around the circumference of the cylindrical tank. For lateral stability, the columns are connected at the top with cast iron beams which have circular perforations. The pulleys and guide rails which facilitated the vertical movement of the holding tank are still in place and are attached to the columns. However, the counterweights used with the pulleys have been removed.

The 1876 gasholder was not the first structure of this type to be built in Petersburg. Edward A. Wyatt, IV, editor of the Progress-Index, a newspaper presently publishing in Petersburg, has collated a number of old newspaper articles which refer to the development of the Petersburg Gas Company. As recorded in the Acts of the Virginia Assembly, 1840-41, the Petersburg Gas Company was incorporated on March 9, 1841. Following a decade of discussion and inactivity, plans for gaslighting the city of Petersburg were instituted. As recorded in the minutes of the Petersburg Common Council for 1851-52, the city was preparing itself for the advent of gas lighting. In the January 3, 1854 South Side Democrat reference is made to 125 lamps which the city of Petersburg paid \$4,000 to keep lit the previous year. This reference indicates that a gasholder was in service by 1853. When this gasholder was destroyed

is uncertain, but during the Civil War Petersburg was heavily shelled by Union artillery, and a gas works would have been a high-priority target. Regardless of whether the original gasholder was destroyed during the war or not, it was replaced at least by 1876.

Though the extant gasholder was not of unprecedented size or design, it remains an interesting specimen in the historical development of the gas industry. A context for evaluating the historical significance of the Petersburg gasholder may be found in R. B. Hodgson's article "The Romance of the Gasholder," published in the November 23, 1927 edition of Gas Journal.

Though a fire at the Petersburg and Hopewell Gas Company's headquarters in 1957 destroyed many files which might have contained pertinent information regarding the 1876 gasholder, the following unpublished material still exists:

Minutes of the Petersburg Gas Light Company, March 9, 1841 through November 11, 1872; and February 14, 1894 through February 1, 1901.

Minutes of the Petersburg Gas Company, April 27, 1911 through December 29, 1926; February 14, 1927 through March 9, 1928.

Minutes of the Petersburg and Hopewell Gas Company, September 12, 1945 through May 27, 1946; and April 4, 1953 through March 3, 1954.

Work order ledgers, Petersburg Gas Company, 1901 through 1912.

These records are presently controlled by the Commonwealth Gas Distribution Corporation, 22 South Sycamore Street, Petersburg, Virginia.